Imperfect language learning vs. active sound change:
The shift [i]>[e] in the verbal pattern hif'il in Modern Hebrew

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Modern Hebrew provides an idiosyncratic case for the study of processes of linguistic change due to discontinuity of its use as a spoken language. Whereas in other languages differences between various historical phases necessarily reflect the outcome of change processes, in the case of Hebrew such differences may have two different sources: (1) imperfect implementation of the classical rules by the original L2 speakers of Modern Hebrew at the initial stages of speech revival; (2) processes of linguistic change which operated in the speech community in further generations. However, delineating the boundaries between these two different categories is not always possible, as the speech habits of the first generations of speakers are unknown since the systematic study of spoken Hebrew is relatively recent, dating back to late 20th century.

The paper offers a new research direction based on the recent discovery of two collections of recordings of spontaneous Hebrew speech made in the 1960s, which open up new possibilities for the diachronic study of spoken Modern Hebrew. One collection consists of informal interviews with first generation speakers of Hebrew (born in the first quarter of the 20th century). The other collection consists of recordings made within one family over 50 years (1963-2013), documenting daily situations in the family life. As all hitherto known historical recordings of Modern Hebrew reflected formal language use, the availability of these new collections offers for the first time the possibility to explore processes of change in spoken Modern Hebrew based on solid linguistic data.

The paper focuses on one conspicuous sound change in contemporary Modern Hebrew, namely the transition from [i] to [e] in the prefix of the verbal pattern hiCCiC, called in Hebrew *hif'il*. Recent studies (e.g. Bolozky 2007) pointed at the growing distribution of the variation *hef'il* at the expense of *hif'il* beyond the circumstances prescribed by the rules of classical Hebrew grammar, leading to a morphological change in the prefix used in this verbal pattern. The linguistic data extracted from the 1960s recordings clearly indicate that the variability found in contemporary language between *hif'il* and *hef'il* has two distinct sources:

(1) An initial state of variability between /i/ and /e/ in forms derived from weak root verbs (initial-Nun and middle-Waw/Yod roots, e.g. *higi'a-hegi'a* 'arrived') due to imperfect language learning in the initial phases of the formation of Modern Hebrew.

(2) A recent change from /i/ to /e/ in *hif'il* forms derived from regular triconsonantal roots (e.g. *hitxil-hetxil* 'started'). In this category, the 1960s

recordings attest to a stable realization of the rules of traditional Hebrew grammar in all age groups, and the occurrence of deviating forms is marginal.

The following table provides the data extracted from the 1960s recordings for two generations of speakers: (1) old adults (born in the first quarter of the 20th century, in their 40s-60s at the time of recording); (2) young adults (born around the 1940s, in their 20s at the time of recording):

Age group	Grammatical form: regular roots (hiCCiC)	Grammatical forms: initial guttural (heCCiC)	Non-grammatical form: regular roots (heCCiC)	Non-grammatical form: initial guttural (hiCCiC)
Old adults	299 (92.57%)	59 (95.16%)	24 (7.43%)	3 (4.84%)
Young adults	96 (83.47%)	12 (92.31%)	19 (16.52%)	1 (7.69%)

Based on Ohala's theory of sound change (Ohala1981, 1989, 1993, 2012), the measure of synchronic variation documented in the 1960s recordings will be analyzed as a precursor of the sound change that developed in the language at a later stage.

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